

After decades of talk about reforming our country's health care system, we have finally made some real progress towards fixing our broken health care system. Following months of listening to passionate and knowledgeable constituents and medical professionals, I voted in favor of the Affordable Health Care for America Act.

My first priority has always been voting for my district, and I have proven my willingness to stand up for what I believe is right. Earlier this year, I bucked my party's leadership and voted against the Cap and Trade legislation because I felt it was not in the best interest of my district. While there were some good intentions in that bill, I felt there were too many provisions in that would unfairly punish industries in our area.

When it came time to vote on the health reform bill, I again looked at what was best for my constituents. From the beginning, I have said that I would vote for a bill that brought stability and security to the health care system, lowered the cost of health care, insured broader coverage, and did all this without increasing our deficit. This legislation accomplishes all of this and more.

The bill passed by the House on Saturday has come a long way since it was first introduced in July. There were a number of changes put in place that are particularly beneficial to rural areas like ours and many other adjustments to quickly improve benefits. Here are just a few of the good things that were included:

For seniors, this bill starts closing the Medicare Part D prescription drug donut hole by \$500 and institutes a 50% discount on brand-name medication.

For those on COBRA, this legislation mandates that your coverage be extended until the Exchange is set up so that you don't have to be dumped onto the private insurance market.

For those struggling to find insurance because of a pre-existing condition, you will now have the opportunity to purchase reasonably priced insurance through a temporary insurance program until the Exchange is set up.

For those that have been dropped from coverage or reached a "cap" on coverage allowance, those antics have been outlawed and you will no longer be at the mercy of an unfair insurance company.

For our doctors, the public option will receive negotiated rates which are not tied to Medicare rates, and there will be a 10% incentive payment for primary care physicians practicing in underserved areas.

After considering these important changes, I had to make a decision about whether or not my district would benefit from this legislation. Examining the numbers made the answer clear. In the Sixth District, this legislation will improve employer-based coverage for 365,000 residents.

Lower coverage rates will be available for 174,000 households through the health insurance exchange. Almost 10,000 people with pre-existing conditions will finally be able to get good health insurance, as will the 45,000 that are currently uninsured. And 9,200 Medicare recipients will benefit from the closing of the prescription drug donut hole.

As a small business owner, I also understand the vital benefits in this bill for employers currently being crushed by health care costs. Our district has 12,600 small businesses that will qualify to participate in the health insurance exchange and benefit from group rates and greater options. In addition, some small businesses that offer health care will be eligible to receive a tax credit to help defer costs.

As a Blue Dog Democrat, I am committed to fiscal responsibility within our government and I am proud that this bill is deficit-neutral. The cost of health care reform is paid for by eliminating waste and fraud in Medicare and Medicaid and by imposing a surcharge on the top 0.3% wealthiest individuals – only 260 households in my district. In fact, according to the Congressional Budget Office, this legislation will actually reduce our nation's deficit by \$109 billion over the next decade.

In the end, I recognize and respect that there are those who will disagree with my decision. But I want everyone to know that I voted for this historic health care bill with your best interests in mind. While this legislation is not perfect, it is an important first step in fixing our broken health care system. I believe the Affordable Health Care for America Act will help Ohioans and our entire country on the road to a better health care system and long-term financial recovery.